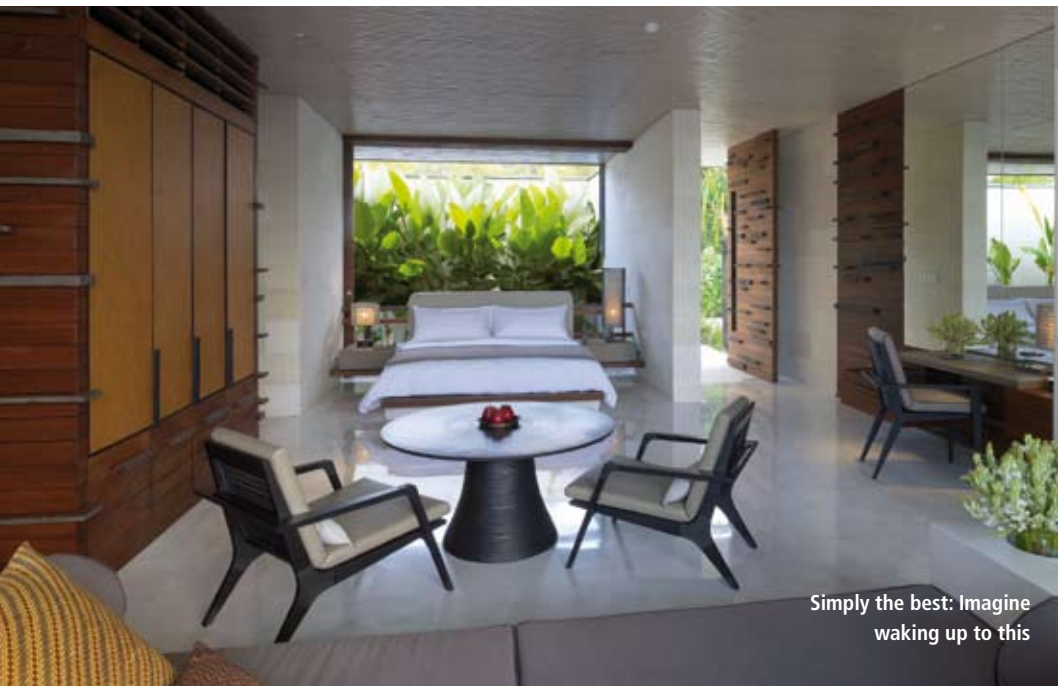
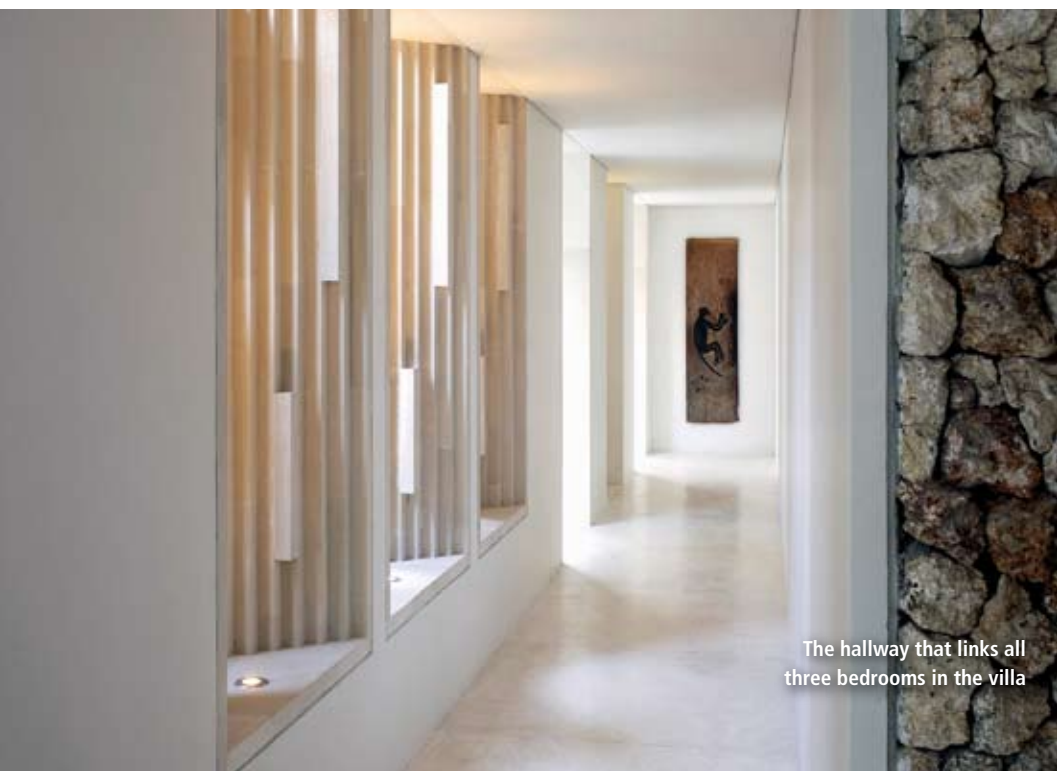
TRAVEL

A US$2 million PARADISE

Audrey Simon discovers that for this price, one can be the proud owner of a three-bedroom villa in Bali that comes with a never-ending view of the Indian Ocean



Simply the best: Imagine waking up to this



The hallway that links all three bedrooms in the villa

Our four-wheel drive vehicle took a small group of Singaporean journalists up a steep dirt road to the bottom of the driveway and then we walked up to what looked like an uncompleted home, often stepping over debris and other items one would find at a construction site. My first reaction was, what could Indonesian property developer Franky Tjahyadikarta possibly show me in this heap?

When Tjahyadikarta pushed open the front door to let us in, there was a collective sigh of awe from us. Until then, the three-bedroom villa at Alila Villas Uluwatu had existed only in our dreams. The front patio offers a clear view of the Indian Ocean, which was an intense blue that late afternoon in May. The constant breeze blowing through the villa, located on the limestone cliffs on the southernmost tip of Bali, was a much-needed balm for city dwellers.

Tjahyadikarta's excitement over his latest project is palpable as he takes us from room to room like a proud homeowner. The youthful looking 50-year-old first ventured into property development 21 years ago. Since then, he has worked on several projects.

In a relaxed post-dinner chat over coffee at the Four Seasons Hotel in Jimbaran Bay, Tjahyadikarta also proved his skill as a storyteller. He related the time when he first bought a small plot of land in Manggis.

The civil engineer-turned-property developer then roped in his friend, Adrian Zecha. Together, they bought more land and built Amankila Manggis. The resort that first opened its doors in 1992 has had pages in glossy travel magazines devoted to its beauty and architectural wonder.

Alila Villas Uluwatu is poised to follow in Amankila's footsteps.

Favourite with Europeans

Even though the 25 hillside villas at Alila Villas Uluwatu are due to be completed in mid-2008, the show villa already reflects the ultimate in luxury in its furniture and fittings. The choice was entrusted to Singapore-based WOHA, the award-winning architectural firm that is largely responsible for the concept of the three-bedroom villas that are up for sale at US$2 million ($3.06 million) each and the 41 one-bedroom hotel villas that are only available for rent.

We ask Tjahyadikarta about buyers' confidence in Bali following a series of tragedies such as 9/11, after which the US government put a sanction on Americans travelling to Indonesia, and the two bombings that Bali suffered in 2002 and 2005.

"Europeans are mostly the ones buying properties in Bali," he says. "They are usually in their 40s or 50s… these are people who just want a holiday home here because they like the Balinese culture and are not so much looking at properties as an investment."

Alila Villas Uluwatu provides a 90-year lease should you decide to buy a villa. Tjahyadikarta also says "the [Indonesian] laws are going to change towards foreign ownership where foreigners can directly own properties. But what kind of property, we don't know yet".

Eco homeowner

If the movie *An Inconvenient Truth* spurred you to separate your trash, you will surely want to own a home and keep your eco-conscience as clear as the Indian Ocean.

Alila Villas Uluwatu uses Environmentally Sustainable Design (ESD), which gets a nod of approval from Green Globe 21 Standards. Green Globe 21 is an organisation that provides the travel and

Whether from the patio or infinity pool, you'll be able to catch the spectacular sunset as well as views of the Indian Ocean

An outdoor rest area for afternoon tea or just a nap

PICTURES: TIM GRIFFITH

tourism industry with guidelines on providing an eco-friendly environment to live in.

In short, the villas are constructed using locally sourced building materials. WOHA partner Richard Hassell confirms this: "We source local materials such as old telephone poles from Java and ulin wood from Bali."

Water conservation is also part of the green process and again, soakaway tanks are used so that rainwater is harvested and reused.

A view to thrill

Just as sunset was setting in, the media was ushered out of the way as the photographer needed some shots of the fabulous scene.

What struck me the most was that every villa on this 13.5ha plot offers a view of the ocean. This is cleverly done by doing away with the pointed roofs that tourists have come to expect of the Balinese skyline. In its place are terraced roofs similar to that of the terraced paddy fields that are found all over Bali. Instead of leaving these flat roofs empty, they will be filled with carefully selected landscape.

I can't wait to see the finished product. Meanwhile, I can only imagine — all too fleetingly — that I am lounging on the deck chair or swimming in the infinity pool that overlooks a Savannah landscape perched 130m high on the southernmost end of the magical island of Bali.

How to buy: Call the sales office in Singapore at 6735 8300 or visit www.alilavillasuluwatu.com E

SEE ALSO PAGE 12
— 'THE ALILA EXPERIENCE'

The spa room where your stress melts away

The ALILA experience

Before you sign up for that US$2 million villa, however, you may want to first experience the Alila Ubud and Alila Manggis. Both have the Green Globe 21 certification.

Alila Ubud

The first thing that will probably strike you about Alila Ubud (*left*) is the absence of a television set in your room. Instead, each room has an iPod that is attached to portable speakers.

A must-do while staying here is an early morning trek through the paddy fields. You must be sure-footed as the paths are as narrow as a gymnast's balance beam.

The highlight of my stay has to be the spa treatments available. Therapist Sukasih introduced me to a "skinny moccocino", which is a scrub and body massage that uses coffee grains and coconut shavings to tone and condition skin.

Check out the spa shop and indulge in chocolate brownie sunscreen. It's like rubbing your body with the real thing. While we suggest you don't eat the sunscreen, you should perhaps try the spa cuisine. One memorable dish was the lobster linguini, which contained generous chunks of fresh lobster flesh.

Where: Desa Melinggih Kelod. Payangan Gianyar. Tel: (62) 361 975963; email ubud@alilahotels.com; or visit www.alilahotels.com

Alila Manggis

While some of the journalists welcomed the presence of a TV in the room, I was quite happy to leave it switched off. After all, the entire property is built between the sea and Bali's sacred mountain Mount Agung. It has 53 rooms and two corner suites.

Alila Manggis differs from Alila Ubud in that the type of accommodation offered here is more family-vacation style. The rooms are built around the swimming pool, allowing one to lie on the day bed on the balcony and at the same time, watch the goings-on at the pool.

Because of its proximity to the sea, you can expect snorkelling, diving, fishing and cruising to be major draws. Check with the hotel staff about sea conditions and time of tides.

One of the most admirable and noble activities Alila Manggis is involved in is the East Bali Poverty Project. This seeks to provide nutrition and education to the children living in the remote village in northern East Bali. You, too, can help by purchasing a T-shirt or a book entitled *The Art of Learning By Doing*, which is filled with wonderful and colourful illustrations by those village children. Visit www.eastbalipovertyproject.org.

Where: Desa Buitan Manggis, Kerangasem. Tel: (62) 363 41011, email manggis@alilahotels.com or visit www.alilahotels.com

Watch the goings-on poolside from a vantage point on your balcony

DINE OUT

FINE DINING at a click

Low Shi Ping finds out how easy it is to get a restaurant reservation via Internet portal eat2eat

The next time you make reservations for dinner, pause and consider why the restaurant reservation process still has yet to be fully digitised.

Reserving a table still involves scrambling for the restaurant's telephone number and having to pick up the phone to call the restaurant. On its part, the restaurant will take down the details of your reservation in a big book using a writing instrument.

But in this digital age, doesn't that seem a tad archaic?

Vikram Aggarwal would most certainly agree with you. That's why he started the online restaurant reservation portal, eat2eat, seven years ago.

The concept is breathtakingly simple. Once you open a free account with eat2eat (www.eat2eat.com), you can choose from 900 fine-dining restaurants across 13 cities in Asia-Pacific. Search by a variety of criteria including cuisine, location and ambience.

When you have decided on the restaurant, eat2eat will send you an email with your reservation details, subject to confirmation from the restaurant. Once the reservation is confirmed, just turn up on the appointed day and bon appétit!

"The biggest advantage is that members will get points, which can be redeemed for discounted meals," says Vikram. And if you're planning to dine in any of the 13 cities featured on eat2eat, you can use the portal to decide on a restaurant and make a reservation.

He feels that the portal is perfect for secretaries. "eat2eat is very interested in who makes the reservations," he explains. "When the secretary makes the reservation via our portal, the boss gets the dinner and the secretary gets the points!"

The idea of starting eat2eat struck Vikram while he was doing research as part of his previous job. Back then, he was a corporate banker with what was then known as Chase. He identified that the use of technology in the restaurant space was practically zero.

"When you made restaurant reservations, the process was entirely paper-based. There was virtually no [archival] information about customers who had been there," he says.

When Chase and JPMorgan merged, Vikram decided to opt for the retrenchment package and left the company. Convinced that he had found a niche for himself, he started eat2eat.

"I started my business to create two things — a business-to-consumer online restaurant reservation portal and a business-to-business restaurant reservation software [MaRc]," says Vikram.

Vikram: I'm trying to get people not to use the telephone to make restaurant reservations and educate the restaurants to computerise their reservation system

MaRc (Multiple Access Reservation Centre; www.marcsystem.com) is a software system that is akin to the supporting back office of eat2eat. He says: "Instead of recording reservations in a book, restaurants that have installed MaRc will type the reservation details in the system and book the table immediately.

"MaRc is also linked up to eat2eat such that there can be instantaneous confirmation for eat2eat members when they make online reservations. It's exactly the same as booking an airline seat."

The catch, however, is that Vikram has to convince restaurants to buy and install MaRc. That, in itself, has proven to be an uphill struggle. "Unlike my competitors, I'm trying to develop two things. I'm trying to get people not to use the telephone to make restaurant reservations and, at the same time, educate the restaurants to computerise their reservation system," he says.

MaRc complements eat2eat but the restaurants are not taking the bait. "In Asia-Pacific, particularly Singapore, Bangkok and Kuala Lumpur, restaurants tend not to make too much money. As such, they're unwilling to spend on technology.

"The other problem is that the current system has worked so well for so long. So, why is there the need to change? High staff turnover, which translates into more time needed to train new staff, also prevents restaurants from installing MaRc," he adds.

But do the restaurants really need MaRc? Yes, believes Vikram. "It presents powerful marketing research opportunities. MaRc can keep track of your customer's favourite seats, dishes, beverages, dietary habits and so on. It also makes it easier to market new menus and promotions," he points out.

Vikram feels the tipping point will be when the price of the technology starts decreasing. He also thinks that once the hotels adopt the technology, the restaurants will follow suit.

Fortunately, he has had an easier time with eat2eat. "We're highly rated on Google and Yahoo!. The restaurants need only pay a one-time listing fee. In return, they get a website. Thereafter, they only pay when there is a reservation, when the restaurant is generating revenue."

Plans are underway to revamp the eat2eat website. It will soon allow members to contribute comments and share videos of their dining experiences. Vikram promises to maintain a simple and clean interface.

So, the next time the hunger pangs strike, forget the telephone. Just a few simple clicks and you are likely to get a table at your favourite restaurant. E

Low Shi Ping is a freelance writer with an interest in the luxury lifestyle